

BACK TO THE BIG EASY

A
CHANGE
OF
ADDRESS

In New Orleans, the author Walter Isaacson and his wife, Cathy, are rediscovering his hometown in their convivial new digs.

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The living room of Walter and Cathy Isaacson's apartment, designed by Bill Brockschmidt and Courtney Coleman, in New Orleans's Garden District. Custom sofa by O. Henry House; circa-1810 French daybed, Lorforfs; cocktail table by Roman Thomas; rug, Patterson Flynn & Martin; artwork (left) by Nicole Charbonnet. For details, see Resources.



The Isaacsons' design team—Coleman (left) and Brockschmidt—in the living room. White ceramic side table by BZippy & Co.; sconces, Gallery L7; artwork over mantel by John Rosis.

The journalist Walter Isaacson, former editor of *Time* magazine and biographer of Steve Jobs and Albert Einstein, comes to his love of New Orleans honestly: He was born and raised in the raucously omnivorous, ebullient city. Like many homegrown Southern intellectuals, he went north to make his reputation in the New York literary world. But all those years he was building his career, Isaacson never quite left behind the lyrical city of his birth, with its hothouse atmosphere of sophistication, culture, and inspiration.

New Orleans, in particular, with vernacular architecture and design that is an eccentric mashup of Creole, Greek Revival, Italianate, and Edwardian influences, among others, is hard to quit, especially for those with creative imagination. Traditional Southern manners prevail here, but there is always a whiff of off-kilter fun in the air. Isaacson and his wife of 38 years, Cathy, a lawyer, still spend part of the year in their Upper West Side apartment near Central Park, but their spiritual home is in New Orleans, where they are deeply rooted in the community, serving on the boards of philanthropic and educational organizations.

For decades, they kept a grand, double-height parlor

floor apartment in the French Quarter in an 1840s Creole townhouse smack in the middle of the nonstop revelry (“I love the live music in the streets and the parades,” Isaacson says). But once he took a faculty position a couple of years ago at Tulane University in Uptown New Orleans (he is the Leonard Lauder Professor of American History and Values), commuting to the campus from the house on Royal Street through the quarter’s wingding alleys became a bit too much of an obstacle course.

They didn’t have to look hard for a new abode closer to work. A local developer and restoration specialist, Michael Carbine, who since Hurricane Katrina has made it his mission to create new housing and buoy the local economy, was in the midst of building a meticulously detailed six-unit apartment block 10 minutes from Tulane (via Isaacson’s ideal mode of transportation, the atmospheric, 150-year-old St. Charles streetcar).

To design the interiors—counting the terraces, the apartment encompasses 4,000 square feet—the Isaacsons called upon Brockschmidt & Coleman, whose principals, Courtney Coleman and Bill Brockschmidt, are architects raised in Mississippi and Virginia, respectively; they have been business partners for more than 20 years and now split their practice between New York and New Orleans. The firm has plenty of experience with literary Southerners, having designed homes



The dining room’s soft yellow hue—Farrow & Ball’s Hound Lemon—was inspired by the sultry New Orleans light. Swedish Gustavian dining chairs, Maison & Co.; chandelier, Rewire; custom rug, Fedora Design; artwork by John Alexander.

in both New Orleans and Greenville, Mississippi, for the late writer and bon vivant Julia Reed, as well as for the renowned historian Jon Meacham and his wife, Keith, who live in Nashville.

The Isaacsons wanted their home to allude to the city's eccentric style and its native design codes but not evoke them directly. Many New Orleans residences are dramatic and dark, with heavy lined silk drapes that puddle on the floor, crystal and beaded chandeliers overhead, a plethora of ornate European antiques, and artfully faded Oriental rugs. "That can be lovely, but it can also be overwhelming," says Coleman.

The designers also knew that the Isaacsons loved New York's loft culture—great for mingling with a cocktail while debating politics—and wanted to replicate that openness. Patrons of New Orleans's vibrant local art scene, the couple planned to mix the contemporary works they have collected with antiques. "We wanted the house to look a little tropical, a little Southern, but also have the best things about New York," says Cathy.

To start, the designers installed pine floors, instead of the oak so common in new construction. "It's more casual," says Coleman. "Pine has emotional warmth." They also added a black stone faux fireplace and mantel—a perfect perch for a gin and tonic while discussing the state of the world at gatherings with friends. To create a natural flow, they designed a set of eight-foot-tall sliding doors between the public areas. Fashioning them from mahogany would have been the obvious choice, but the partners instead had them made of faux-grain painted poplar, as a nod to the city's playful side.

With an apartment of such scale—the ceilings are 12 feet high and the ample rooms have a traditional square format—it took cunning to ensure that the furnishings were not dwarfed. In a loft, for example, decorators might resort to installing massive sectionals and vast refectory-size slab dining tables, but that is neither the Isaacsons' nor New Orleans's style; the project required finesse. The couple had quite a few good 19th-century antiques from their previous apartment. Brockschmidt and Coleman brought in such new acquisitions as an early-18th-century oak sideboard and an English Victorian club chair. They also added several contemporary light fixtures, including two huge, cage-like lanterns that dangle above a green slipper chair and a settee in a sand linen.

The Mardi Gras palette of emerald, purple, and gold may be ubiquitous in New Orleans, but the hues of the Isaacsons' home are pale and serene. Cathy wanted a yellow dining room, so the designers used a misty shade to set off the Gustavian dining chairs upholstered in teal Belgian linen. The library has greenish-gray walls, with a digital image printed on metal by the New Orleans multimedia artist Dawn DeDeaux above a blue velvet sofa. On many afternoons, the Isaacsons each grab a volume from the shelves and wander out to the porch for a quiet hour before the evening's guests arrive. "I love to listen to the clattering and ringing of the streetcar," says Isaacson. "It's the soundtrack of my happiest times." ■

The library's cozy character is offset by the strong architecture of a Dawn DeDeaux digital image on metal over the custom sofa. Chandelier, Katie Koch Home; walls and cabinetry in Farrow & Ball's Breakfast Room Green.



A view into the kitchen. Chairs, Industry West; pendant by Charles Edwards UK.



A neoclassical-style table from the estate of Julia Reed serves as the desk in Isaacson's office. Carpet, Stark; pendant, Circa Lighting.